

**NATION-STATE FAILURE:  
A RECURRING PHENOMENON?**

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Weak states, even seemingly strong nation-states in the developing world, fail with increasing frequency. The decade plus since the end of the cold war has witnessed a cascading plethora of state failure, mostly in Africa but also in Asia. In addition, more and more states are at risk, exhibiting acute signs of weakness and/or the likelihood of outright failure. Given new definitions of weakness, failing, failed, and collapsed, and given a broad acceptance of the criteria on which nation-states may be judged along these lines in the future, it is appropriate to prophesy a continuing policy need to monitor and react wisely to this phenomenon.

The reasons for paying close attention to these kinds of nation-states will remain relevant for years if not decades. Unless the developing world becomes much more stable, intercommunal (ethnic, linguistic, and religious) conflict is reduced or ceases altogether, corruption vanishes, good governance becomes common, or the war against terror is won conclusively, the propensity of nation-states to fail will be high and the policy consequences of that failure will correspondingly be serious and many. Most of all, every time a nation-state lurches toward or into failure it poses humanitarian and possible relief issues. It may also become a breeding ground for terror; the more anarchic and anomic the nation-state, the more non-state actors and the forces of terror

can take opportunistic advantage of a deteriorating internal security situation to mobilize adherents, train insurgents, gain control of resources, launder funds, purchase arms, and ready themselves for assault on world order.

In order to devise effective policy, state failure and state collapse should be used precisely, not loosely, and not synonymously with state implosion and state disaster. During the 1990s, the CIA sponsored two major studies and other research to discover the causes of state failure. But the nature of failure was never defined strictly, and the variables developed on the basis of detailed quantitative analysis proved less than robust, and not immediately useful.

The new taxonomy includes four categories of nation-state: strong, weak, failed, and collapsed.<sup>1</sup> **Strong states** unquestionably control their territories and deliver a full range and a high quality of political goods to their citizens. They perform well according to indicators such as GDP per capita, the UNDP Human Development Index, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, and Freedom House's *Freedom of the World Report*.

**Weak States** include an array of nation-states that may be inherently weak because of geographical, physical, or fundamental economic constraints; or are situationally weak because of internal antagonisms, greed, or despotism. Weak states typically harbor ethnic, religious, linguistic, or other tensions that may at some near point be transformed into all out conflict between contending antagonisms. Their ability to provide adequate amounts of political goods is diminished or diminishing. Physical

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<sup>1</sup> - The new definitions and explanations contained in this paper are elaborated upon at much greater length in Robert I. Rotberg, "The Failure and Collapse of Nation-States: Breakdown, Prevention, and Repair," in Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), *Why States Fail: Causes and Consequences* (Princeton, 2004), 1-45.

infrastructural networks are deteriorated. Schools and hospitals show signs of neglect. GDP per capita and similar indicators have fallen or are falling, sometimes dramatically. Levels of venal corruption are high and escalating. The rule of law is honored in the breach. Civil society is harassed. Despots rule.

There is a special category of weak state, the seemingly strong one, always an autocracy, which is secure but at the same time provides few other political goods. Cambodia under Pol Pot was one such state. Iraq under Saddam, and today's Belarus, Turkmenistan, Libya, and North Korea all fit this rubric.

**Failed States** provide only very limited quantities of essential political goods. They progressively forfeit their role as the preferred national suppliers of political goods to upstart warlords and other nonstate actors. A failed state is a hollow polity that is no longer willing or able to perform the fundamental tasks of a nation-state in the modern world. Its institutions are flawed. If legislatures exist at all, they ratify the decisions of a strong executive. Democratic debate is absent. The judiciary is derivative of the executive rather than being independent. Citizens know that they cannot rely on the court system for redress or remedy, especially against the state. The bureaucracy of the state has long ago lost its sense of professional responsibility, and helps to oppress citizens.

Failed states exhibit deteriorating or destroyed infrastructures. The telephones fail, the railways rarely run, water supplies dry up, power falters, and other normal services vanish. Educational and medical facilities crumble literally and metaphorically. Literacy rates fall and infant mortality rates rise. AIDS overwhelms what little there is in the way of a health infrastructure. The poor become more and more impoverished, and battered.

Failed states offer unparalleled economic opportunity for a privileged few, and nothing much for everyone else. Currency speculation and arbitrage benefits the ruling class. Corruption flourishes. GDP per capita levels decline, often precipitously. Growth rates go negative. Inflation soars. Food shortages, even hunger, may follow.

Failed states are insecure. They cannot project power much beyond the capital city, or control their national peripheries. Crime rates rise. Unable to establish an atmosphere of security throughout the nation, the faltering state's failure becomes obvious even before, or as, rebel groups and other contenders arm themselves, threaten the residents of central cities, and overwhelm demoralized government contingents, as in Liberia, Nepal, Sierra Leone, Congo, and Cote d'Ivoire.

**Collapsed States** are rare and extreme versions of a failed state. They exhibit a vacuum of authority. They are mere geographical expressions, black holes into which failed polities have fallen. There is dark energy, but the forces of entropy have overwhelmed the radiance that previously provided some semblance of order and other vital political goods to the local inhabitants. Political goods are obtained through private or ad hoc means. Security is the rule of the strong. Substate actors take over, and parts of the collapsed state exist and function, if in an unrecognized and disordered manner. Collapsed states can only return to being failed, and then perhaps to being weak, if sufficient security is restored to rebuild the institutions and strengthen the legitimacy of the resuscitated state. Lebanon did so thanks to Syrian security, Tajikistan because of Russia, Afghanistan because of the U. S. led invasion, and Sierra Leone because of British intervention.

This taxonomy of comparative state capacity depends on an analysis of governance capabilities. Fundamental to the analysis is performance – the effective delivery by a nation-state of the most crucial political goods. A political good is that intangible and hard to quantify claim that a citizen once made on a sovereign and now make on the state. Those claims, indeed obligations, inform the local political culture, and give content to the social contract between the government and the citizen.

There is a hierarchy of political goods. None is as critical as the supply of security, especially human security. The state's prime function is to provide the political good of security – to prevent cross-border invasions and infiltrations, to eliminate domestic threats to or attacks upon the national order and social structure, to prevent crime and any related dangers to human security, and to enable citizens to resolve their differences with the state and their fellow inhabitants without recourse to arms or other forms of physical coercion.

Other political goods can be supplied only within a framework of security. Modern states strive to provide predictable methods of adjudicating disputes and regulating both the norms and the mores of a society. The essence of that political good implies codes and procedures that together comprise an enforceable body of law and contract, an effective judicial system and norms that encompass the rule of law.

Other political goods typically supplied by states and expected by their citizens include medical and health care; schools and educational instruction; roads, railways, harbors and other arteries of commerce; a money and banking system; a fiscal and institutional context within which citizens can pursue entrepreneurial goals and prosper;

space for the flowering of civil society; and methods of regulating the sharing of the environmental commons.

Weak states quickly become failed states, as the case of Cote d'Ivoire in 2002 demonstrates. In the aftermath of President Felix Houphouet-Boigny's death in 1993, his successors sought electoral success by appealing to majority southerners. They began progressively discriminating against northerners ; consequently, the expectations of rough equity that had long held the country together vanished. The legitimacy of the regime in charge also vanished and Cote d'Ivoire, despite its decades of prosperity and success, and despite its ability to deliver many political goods, became ripe for failure. When elections were falsified and northern standard-bearers ousted, a countervailing movement arose and the state's monopoly of force was soon found inadequate. Failure came quickly, further deterioration being halted only by the arrival of French troops.

The Cote d'Ivoire model of leadership error compounded with arrogance and corruption resulting in instability, extreme weakness, and subsequent failure, is readily replicable. Witness Bolivia and Nepal, and the less obvious but potentially disruptive cases of Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, and the Central African Republic. Another, more unusual and distinctive, case is Zimbabwe, where one of Africa's most prosperous nations and most well educated populations has been transformed into an all but failed nation-state by the actions of an avaricious leader. In that country, the government no longer supplies political goods, but complete failure has so far been avoided by the absence of large-scale internal violence.

There are many weak states capable of harboring the incubus of failure. Most of the incipient failures will be in Africa, but as the cases of Nepal and the Solomon Islands

indicate, once stable states in Asia and Oceania are as susceptible to failure as states that are historically weak. Likewise, as the ongoing case of Bolivia and the twentieth anniversary of the U. S. invasion of Grenada suggest, the Americas will also be the locale of important failures now and well into the future.

Three dozen states in the developing world can be called weak. Some, such as Haiti and Niger, are endemically weak, and need never slide from weakness into failure. These states lack the kinds of insurgencies which could produce score-settling strife. Class conflict may exist, but other cleavages which can sharply differentiate contending groups are absent. Another category of weak state, such as Chad and Papua-New Guinea, often appears on the brink of failure; during civil wars such states become failed. A third category may contain ethnic, religious, or linguistic divisions sufficient, and sufficiently strong, to cause the kinds of strife which automatically accompany failure. Nigeria bears watching for many of these and other reasons.

Since human agency is the intervening variable of nation-state failure, observing how leaders behave is one of several indicators of impending failure. Preying on their own people is a sign; so is intensifying autocracy, the number of political prisoners, unexplained assassinations, and the denial of fundamental human rights and civil liberties. Judicial independence is often the first to be eroded by new dictators and similar forces. Other indicators of impending failure include massively declining GDPs per capita, soaring inflation, decreasing life expectancies, the growth of large-scale corruption, electoral fraud, border incursions, the rise of powerful nonstate actors, escalating rates of crime, desperately deteriorated roads, rises in the rates of emigration and smuggling, the informal adoption of outside currencies as acceptable tender, and the

privatization of education and health services. Harder to notice casually, but often present along with corruption and smuggling, are conditions conducive to terror. The more anarchic and disrupted the country, the more hospitable the ground will be for the creation and training of rebels and revolutionaries. Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Congo – not to mention Afghanistan – were perfect settings for resource depredations and swaps, money laundering, training experiments, and (to quote George Padmore) fishing in troubled waters.

The presence of internal strife is a necessary but not sufficient indicator of failure. All failed states present policy choices for Washington; all failed states are places where antagonism has turned violent. But civil wars alone do not in and of themselves produce failure, witness Colombia, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka. In those places the delivery of political goods in sufficient quantity and quality to a substantial majority of citizens inoculates against failure. But those and similar states deserve to be watched closely.

The failed state problem remains an enduring policy issue. Failed states breed regional instability and regional failure, as the Sierra Leonean-Liberian-Guinean-Cote d'Ivoirian quadrangle illustrates so well. The Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan duo has a similar potential, particularly given next door Afghanistan, and the possibility that the Turkmen and Uzbek dictatorships will not last forever. The Australians and their Pacific Island allies acted in the Solomons to avert a similar cascade of destruction throughout the nations of their region.

In addition to the possibility that collapsed and failed states will continue to serve as ample reservoirs of terror, as Somalia does, a plethora of civil wars is neither helpful for indigenous economic development nor for the struggle against the spread of the AIDS



pandemic. Just as it is in the U. S. direct national interest to throttle terror, so it is in our interest to reduce AIDS and poverty worldwide. War anywhere, particularly wars with the kinds of civilian casualties that have been witnessed during and since the 1990s, are harmful to the strengthening of a U. S. led peaceful world. A global superpower cannot prosper at home if its attention and energies are endlessly distracted by threats from and instability abroad.

From a cost-benefit analysis, too, it is much less expensive to prevent state failing and failure than it is to provide post-conflict humanitarian relief and/or funds for post-conflict reconstruction. Afghanistan and Iraq are only the latest examples of how costly intervention can be, followed by an even more expensive process of societal rebuilding. It is in the U. S. interest to recognize the obvious tocsins of deterioration in weak nation-states so that it can help avert the slide toward failure and the enormous costs and consequences of such a slide. Thus the failed state problem is very much a problem, and a problem for the next two decades, for Washington, not just for neighbors, regions, the UN, and humanitarians. There will be no end of cases and instances; the policy choices will concern where and when to intervene, and how early. A strong argument can consequently be made for increasing the capacities and capabilities both of the UN, and of U. S. intelligence, to judge and deal with impending failure. The larger question is how to engage the forces of world order appropriately to strengthen weak states and deter – globally – those factors that everywhere in the developing world impel or motivate failure.